

Joy: The Joy of Inclusion - 26th February 2023

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 February 2023

Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. So we're continuing with our series of joy. And let me just ask you, starters for 10 then. Fingers on buzzers. Anybody want to shout out what you think that might be a picture of?

Go for it. Sparkler. Yeah, that's what I would have gone with. Yeah, stop motion of a sparkler. Anything else? Wiggles, squiggles, yeah, random bits of light wandering around, yeah? Well, it is in fact an image of a proton collision. Of course, of course. I mean, obviously, it's an image of a proton collision, isn't it? And what you are seeing as you're looking at this picture is the release of quarks and gluons. All right, don't even ask, okay? But that's what, it's subatomic particles, okay? And it's taken from the Large Hadron Collider, which is in Switzerland, as you know, in CERN. Last year, they discovered three, no less, new exotic subatomic particles that help explain how the centres of atoms are held together. I can see the look of horror on people's faces. Where is he going with this? Well, you'll probably know that the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, it's the world's largest and most powerful particle accelerator. It's a 27-kilometre ring of superconducting magnets, okay, with a number of accelerating structures. And you can kind of get an idea of it from looking at this. It looks like a rocket, doesn't it? And it sort of is, in a way. And those accelerating structures actually boost the energy of the particles that are whizzing around the accelerator. And there are two of those, two high-energy beams.

And what essentially it does is it brings it up to very, very close to the speed of light, and then bang! And there's a huge kind of collision that happens. And it releases all sorts of weird and wonderful subatomic particles. And some of you probably remember back in 2012, as you can remember, the discovery of the Higgs boson. Remember that? Yeah? No, no, no. Don't remember that at all. Yeah. Okay, well, it did happen, I promise. And it was called at the time, it was called at the time, the God particle. Do you remember that? Yeah, I might remember that.

Because it said that to be what caused the Big Bang, what created our universe and why matter has mass. Okay? And that's why it forms then into planets and stars and all the physical bodies, and actually, pretty much everything. Now, if you want to know more than that, you have to go and talk to my eldest son, Josh, who did physics for his master's and he's doing a PhD in physics, because I'm not going to pretend that I actually know anything about this.

Okay. And certainly not any of the maths of it. But what the experiments at CERN into dark energy and into dark matter and into axions and supersymmetry, they've got some wonderful names, haven't they? And ghost particles, that sounds, you know, what's that about? Or my personal favourite, all right, weakly interacting massive particles are what the physicists at CERN like to call the wimps. I mean, it's a physics joke, isn't it, really? So what all these experiments are telling us is that the whole of the subatomic universe at the quantum level is mind-bogglingly strange. You probably knew that already. It's interconnected and it's interrelated in unimaginable ways that we haven't even begun to discover yet. Although one thing that they are pretty certain about is the existence of some strange force that literally holds everything together. And in the world of physics, okay, there actually is the search for a unifying theory that's been going on for some time. And they don't know what to call it and they don't really know how to identify it. But the best they can come up with is this term dark matter, which you might have heard about. It sort of acts like a cosmic glue. And from what the science tells us so far, it's about 85% of the universe. So it's most of the universe.

[4 : 37] Now you might be thinking, Ian, what on earth has this got to do with our topic today? Well, if this is the science of matter and what the scientists at CERN are uncovering is the basis of our physical subatomic reality, okay? Yeah, that's a big word, isn't it? Our physical subatomic reality, then in some way, in some way, this must be a reflection of both how God is at work in our universe, in the universe, and of our own existence and reality. That's pretty deep stuff, isn't it, really? And so for me, as I've sort of been thinking about this, it begs the question, in a spiritual sense, what does this look like? And so here is another image that I think might hold some answers for us. Now, some of you might be familiar with that.

It's an icon created by Andrei Rublev in the 15th century. It's known as two things, actually. It's known as the Hospitality of Abraham and also the Trinity. And I've put the original on the left and the restored version of the icon on the right. And I've actually been interested in this icon for quite some time. And I bought my own copy of it last year. Me and Lisa went to Halkidiki.

We actually went to, I don't know if any of you know, Mount Athos. It's the home of the Greek Orthodox Church. And every other shop, this is true, isn't it, Lisa? Every other shop, as you walk down, the high street world is not much of a high street, but what you walk down, it's an icon shop.

It's just wall-to-wall icons everywhere. And I mean, some of them are huge, really big. But anyway, I kind of got my own copy for it. So in its simplest form, all right, and I say in its simplest form, it depicts three angels who visited Abraham at the Oaks of Marmara. You can go and read about that in Genesis 18. And they're seated around a rectangular, you can see a rectangular table on which sits a chalice, which alludes to the Eucharist. Now, tradition says that the figure from the left, so looking from the left-hand side, okay, represents the Father, then the Son, and then the Spirit.

And so Rublev depicts the three as one Lord. And each of them, if you can see on the actual kind of restored version, I don't know how good the image is from where you're sitting, but each of them is actually holding a rod in their left hand. And that symbolizes equality. And each of them is wearing a cloak of blue, the color of divinity. And if you look closely, I know you may not be able to see it from here, but if you could look closely, you'll see that each has identical faces depicting oneness.

[7 : 49] And if you look closely at those faces, particularly at their hands as well, actually, they are gender neutral. They are neither clearly male nor female.

Now, there is a beautiful circular movement in the icon between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. And the Son and the Spirit incline their heads towards the Father, and then he directs his gaze back at them.

The Father blesses the Son. The Son accepts the cup, okay, in the center of the table, the cup of sacrifice. His hand is out to take it, okay? And the Spirit comforts the Son in his mission.

So it's rich. It really is. I mean, I can't even begin to. The people have written whole books on this, okay? It is so rich with symbolism. It's probably one of the most well-known icons. And it's rich also with very deliberate use of perspective.

Now, one of my kind of favorite people I read and all I've read is the theologian Henry Nguyen. I know some of you have come across him. And as he gazed into this icon, he reflected on the joy that he felt of being drawn into the circle, this circle of kind of divine love between the three.

[9 : 10] And the space here at the front, okay, is left for us. And the more he looked at this image, the more he came to realize it wasn't just a painting or some helpful visual explanation of a difficult doctrine, but rather a gentle invitation to enter into, to participate in this exchange taking place.

Now, theologians in the early church were trying to get their heads around this relationship that we call the Trinity. Now, if any of you have ever been to a Greek, I don't know, dancing display, if you're maybe on holiday or you've been to a Greek wedding, you'll have seen their distinctive way of dancing.

It's called perichoresis. Peri, which means circular, okay, so it's the idea of going around or circular. And koresis, which means to give way and come back, okay.

It's a sense of motion backwards and forwards, giving and receiving, giving and receiving. Okay, it's where we get, of course, the word choreography. Now, there are usually at least three dancers with baller-like music playing in the background, just like that.

You want to get up, don't you? And as they dance, they start to go in circles, don't they? It's kind of like the way that the rhythm of the music takes you, and they're weaving in and out this beautiful pattern of motion.

[10 : 43] And as that happens, the music gets faster and faster and faster and quicker and quicker and quicker. Sorry about that, I've got to stop it eventually. And all the while, they're staying in perfect rhythm and sync with one another.

If they're doing it well, it looks good. And eventually, they're dancing so quickly that as you look at them, it sort of kind of becomes a blur, and that's the whole point.

Their individual identities have become part of a much larger dance. And so it's kind of that intertwining. And the early church fathers looked at that, and mothers, and at that dance, the perichoresis, and they said, that, that is what the Trinity is like.

It's a harmonious relationship of love and joy in which there is mutual giving and receiving. The perichoresis is a flow of, if you like, divine energy and movement.

God, not as a particle, but as the relationship between the particles, the Higgs boson, okay?

[12 : 01] Holding it all together. It's both fully personal and interpersonal, expressing the essence and the unity of God. And so it's against this backdrop, this is why I've spent the time to sort of explain this to you, this image, this sense of movement of mystical interconnectedness, and the joy of being drawn in and included in this divine dance, and being welcome at the table.

It's against that that we get to our Bible reading and encounter that Jesus has in Luke's gospel. So, picture the scene, if you will.

It's the Sabbath, and Jesus has been invited into the home of one of the leading religious leaders in the village, probably along with family and friends, another guest.

So he's sitting, or probably more likely at that time, reclining with them, eating, drinking, talking, you know, the usual sort of thing you do. But the tension, and we know because of the passages before in this verse, the tension is palpable.

All eyes are on Jesus. They are watching his every move. They're just waiting for him to slip up. And then someone shouts out a promise that's in Scripture, in the book of Isaiah, whilst they're at the party.

[13 : 34] It's a vision of a great banquet at the end of time, overflowing with food and wine and laughter and joy, when all of God's people get invited to the party.

And they called this, you've probably heard of it, the Day of the Lord. It's the banquet at the end of time. And so really, really what's going on here is that this is a question.

It's a challenge directly to Jesus. Okay then. Who gets invited to this party, Jesus? Who's in the dance? And so reading, we're going to watch a clip from, reading from verse 16.

Jesus replied, A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet, he sent his servant to tell those who'd been invited, come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.

[14 : 47] Another said, I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me. Still another said, I just got married, so I can't come.

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

Sir, the servant said, what you ordered has been done, but there is still room. Then the master told his servant, Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in so that my house will be full.

I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet. Now, I don't like you, but I quite like a good party.

Yesterday, me and Lisa were at Lisa's cousin and Matty's brother's wedding, Mark and his now wife, Debbie, and it was just great to be part of that, and I actually got to be an usher.

[15 : 59] I've never done that before. I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing, but it seemed to all go okay. It was a lovely wedding, and it was a lovely family affair, as often, of course, weddings are, particularly for all the Suttons who were there in force.

And I was just thinking back, and I remember, it's quite a few years ago now, but I remember Lisa and myself, obviously when he was alive, we organized an 80th birthday party for Lisa's dad, Jack.

And we hired the hall, and we sorted out all the food and the drink and the entertainment, and then we sent out all the, and then Jack sent out all the invitations to family and friends.

And so Lisa then sort of thought, okay, better just check on numbers here. So she said to her dad, how many invitations, dad, have you sent out so we can make sure that we've got enough food and drinks for all the guests?

And so we said, about 50, you know, around about 50. So the big night arrives, we all get to the hall, we set things up early, started laying out the food, making up the sandwiches.

[17 : 04] It was all going like clockwork. You know what's coming, don't you? And then the guests started arriving, and I can't remember exactly at what point we noticed or realized, that there were a lot more people arriving than we'd actually catered for.

I mean, it's your worst nightmare, isn't it? Okay. And what Jack hadn't mentioned to Lisa was that when he'd written out the invitations, he had put on the invites, and all your family.

Yeah, it's sort of an important point, isn't it really? And that, you know, that was great. It was fantastic, because that's what it was. It's a family affair. But now, of course, we had no idea how many people were actually going to be at this party.

And so we were frantically making sandwiches, and we roped in all the friends that were there that we could ask. And they came and helped us as well to sort of prepare more food.

You know, it wasn't quite the feeding of the 5,000 with the hovis and the cans of tuna, but, you know, nobody went hungry that night. And in the end, of course, it was a really good night. And I know Jack was really pleased that so many members of his family came to the party.

[18 : 25] And yeah, of course, it was a great opportunity, as these sorts of parties are, to sort of catch up with people, you know, and share news and enjoy company, eat and drink and be merry and all that sort of stuff, and maybe even get on the dance floor and embarrass yourself.

But you know what? They mostly came, I think, because they loved and respected Jack. It was his birthday, and Jack was the head of the family.

So why wouldn't they want to be there? And I wonder how you would feel if, you know, you threw a party and none of the people you invited came.

I'm guessing pretty bruised and hurt is a very, very deep sense of personal rejection, isn't there, in that. And maybe, maybe angry that people have done that.

Almost certainly disappointed with people we thought were our friends. And I'm sure those listening to Jesus would have, would have kind of got that.

[19 : 29] They would have known, they would have known immediately just how lame these excuses were. Maybe, I don't know, getting married, meh, you know, maybe that one's not so bad. But certainly, you know, and the thing is, this has obviously been written to emphasise a particular point the way the parable's been put together.

So it's no, it's no kind of accident that it's like one after another. It's a triple whammy. Okay, the rejection is total. The rejection is complete.

The host has lost faith, which if you know anything about the Middle East and the Middle Eastern sort of culture, that's pretty much the worst thing that can happen to you.

He's lost honour amongst his peers. Any prestige that he had has evaporated. Nobody comes.

You know, I wonder, maybe more, in a more subtle way, I wonder if Jesus was letting his audience, the religious leaders he was talking to, know that he knows that they were scheming to discredit him.

[20 : 37] Ganging up to boycott his party. And that this is quite deliberate. So it's sort of like, well, you're trying to close down my party.

But hey, guess what? Because this so easily, couldn't it, this could be a story about revenge and retaliation for being publicly humiliated, but instead it gets turned around into a story about shockingly outrageous inclusion and generosity.

Going to the alleys, the back streets, you're going to bring those people in here? The poor? The lame? The blind?

Seriously? And Jesus says, yes. Those that you'll have nothing to do with, those who live on the margins of this community, those that don't expect much and actually don't get much back out of this life, yeah, go and find them and invite them back.

In fact, go and invite all of them and don't take no for an answer. A bit like being polite, isn't it? I think what it's meant here is a bit like saying when someone offers you a second portion when you're out for dinner and you think, oh no, I couldn't possibly, you know, when you actually what you want to do is get three.

[21 : 58] So that's what I think Jesus is kind of getting at here. Just come because they are all welcome in my house.

Now, back then, and this is an important point, okay, back then, sitting down to a meal, especially a formal meal with someone, meant that you identified yourself with them and their position in society.

And so now Jesus is saying in this parable, this, this is what the father does. He takes the lowest place. He doesn't give us stuff about honour or prestige or position.

Why would he? And if justice and righteous anger were the main thing here, the father would have called off the whole party, he would have struck everybody off the list, never to be invited again and probably gone off in a huff, which is maybe what we would do.

But that's not the father that Jesus portrays in this parable. No, he's a God of reckless generosity and infinite mercy. He just wants to give it all away.

[23 : 19] And so he sits down with those that nobody else wants to, identifying with their lives, where they are, just as they are. It's a radical, I think it's a radical kind of picture of inclusiveness.

Here's a father who is so humble he couldn't even care less about giving everything up, emptying himself out for those that most people and certainly most of his guests that were sitting around the table at the time, he shared this parable, wouldn't have given the time of day to.

And deep down, isn't that what we all desperately long to be assured of? You know, the antidote if you want to fear and rejection that we are loved and accepted, that through Jesus the father has given everything, everything away to sit down with us.

I think joy comes when we have an unshakable assurance of who we really are. We sang it earlier. And what we're really worth to the one that we matter most to.

when you know that, I think you can pretty much endure anything. And so you join in the dance. Now, I don't know if you've seen it.

[24 : 54] Yeah, who's seen the piano? Just quick hands up. Yeah, on Wednesday, yeah, fantastic, wasn't it? There's a new show on channel four if you haven't, okay, it's called The Piano.

It's a show searching for the best amateur piano performers in the UK. And the winner gets to play at the Royal Festival Hall in London. And the episode last Wednesday was at Leeds railway station.

And it had a young 13-year-old girl, and that's Lucy up there. She was playing the piano. She is both blind and neurodiverse.

her piano teacher, who you'll see in a minute, a man called Daniel Bath, was someone who took the time to sit down with Lucy from quite a young age when she showed promise playing the piano, to identify with her and to understand where she was at so that he, could help her by allowing her hands to follow his along the keys.

She learned to play piano. This, if you haven't seen it, this is what Lucy played. Step, coming up to the piano. Ready, big step. Good girl.

[26 : 18] Well done. Come and sit down in the middle. Down. That's just right. Find the pedal. We should say that often at the end of a performance, Lucy covers her ears.

She likes the applause but she doesn't like the sound of the applause. So her fingers go in her ears for sensory reasons. I don't have to tell people not to. She loves applause. Okay, fine. 100%.

Ready? In a minute you're going to play Nocturne in B-flat minor by Chopin. Shall we start playing? See? Here we go. A Ask A Tour T Thank you.

It's unbelievable that she can play this piece. How does she study? It's incredible. Yes!

Oh, my God. Can I go and grab that? Oh, my God. This is...this is impossible. Baby!

[28 : 28] Goddammit! You were so good. Lucy, it was so lovely to meet you. You were tremendous. Oh, she's...yay! You're a trap. Only one, though. Yeah.

It's more than none. It's more than I deserve. I'm speechless. I don't know what to say. I really don't know what to say. For two pernicky, opinionated, pains in the arses to be completely flummoxed and speechless.

Yeah. I mean... It's beautiful to watch, isn't it? You can see, at least I can. I'm sure you can as well.

Just how much she's lost in wonder and joy as she plays. And I'm guessing that's how Lucy is able to express who she really is, beyond all the physical and mental challenges that she has to deal with in her life.

That's when Lucy gets to dance. Let me just read to you from the letter of Philippians. It's from chapter 2.

[29 : 39] If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete.

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.

Taking the form of God as something to be exploited, taking the form of God as something to be exploited, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

It's a beautiful and challenging hymn that Paul shares here with us. And just by way of illustrating something of what I think it means, let me just share with you another profound parable of our times.

[31 : 03] And it's adapted from a short story by Isaac Dennison, was made into a film, you may have seen it in 1987, but probably not, called Babette's Feast. And so we get into the story and we discover that its heroine, Babette, had until recently been one of the most celebrated chefs in Paris.

But during the political riots there in 1871, she loses everything. She loses her restaurant, her livelihood, her family, everything. And she flees for her life to Denmark and is taken in by two aging sisters who have given their lives to trying to hold together the spiritual community that their father formed.

And the remaining believers have grown old and gnarly. They are always bickering amongst themselves.

And Babette tries as best she can to kind of lift their spirits, but nothing seems to turn the situation around. And then out of the blue, a letter arrives for Babette.

And it informs her that she's won three million francs in the lottery back in Paris from a ticket she held. And then and there she decides to treat these Danish peasants to a proper French dinner.

[32 : 31] And so she imports all the necessary ingredients for the seven course meal, each with its own appropriate wines, champagnes, liqueurs, and also all the china dinnerware, the silver cutlery, the damask tablecloths, the crystal glassware, everything.

And the film zeroes in on the banquet table as the astounded Danish peasants are suddenly faced with this extravagant feast of abundance. And at first they're frightened and they're suspicious.

By little by little their mood kind of mellows and they slowly relax into gratitude and forgiveness. And the last scene of the banquet has them all kind of stumbling around, a little bit worse for wear, but full of joy.

And they go out into the village square where they form a circle around the fountain. That's interesting. And they begin to sing and dance together.

After all these years, they have finally touched the wellspring. And their hearts are overflowing with joy. And then someone turns to Babette and says, Well, I guess you'll be leaving us now, now that you're a rich woman.

[33 : 56] Rich, says Babette, no, I'm not rich. I spent every penny I had on that banquet.

Three million francs. It's a reckless, extravagant sacrifice. And in one sense, it just seems so wasted on these poor peasants that can't really begin to comprehend the magnitude of the gift that they've received.

But the banquet table is set before them anyway. It's her no-holds-barred generosity that Babette offers these broken, dispirited souls a taste of reassurance and joy that their long years of faithfulness have not been in vain.

I think Babette mirrors to them what God is like, what love is like, what it truly means to be human.

And she does it precisely by giving everything away in a single act of extravagant abundance. We serve a God who pours himself out for us in self-emptying love and sacrifice and then invites us to come and join in, sit down and break bread.

[35 : 24] So how will we respond to this? How might we reflect that in the way that we live? And who will we take time to sit down with?

Amen.